

Cold War, Warm Runners and Hot Heads

By Karsten Lippmann and Volker Kluge



An independent GDR team took part in the Olympic Winter Games in Grenoble fifty years ago. The flag-bearer at the opening ceremony was their 1964 Olympic luge champion, Thomas Köhler.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive

Fifty years ago, on 6th February 1968, a team from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) entered the Olympic arena for the first time. This had been preceded a few months earlier, 8th October 1965, when the IOC recognized the title “East Germany” as an NOC.¹ This ended an era of common German teams that had started twelve years earlier in Cortina d’Ampezzo and Melbourne.

However, the IOC decision was to be valid only for 1968 and under the condition that the hitherto valid common flag and anthem (final chorus of Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*) should be retained. While the East German NOC had been concerned about all of its rights

during the IOC Session held in Mexico City, there was no secret that back in West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany or FRG), which until then had refused state recognition of the GDR, it was hoped that by 1972, when the Summer Games would take place in Munich, there would be a return to the former ruling of common teams.

Tensions typical during the time of the Cold War, which in the case of a divided Germany had occupied the IOC at almost every meeting since 1951, still had not eased. In fact, tensions had increased before the 1968 Winter Games when the East German, Ralph Pöhland, sought political asylum in West Germany. Among the candidates for a medal in the Nordic Combination, Pöhland, three weeks before the start of the Winter Games, had used a competition in Le Brassus, Switzerland, to defect. This coup had been organised by 1960 Olympic champion Georg Thoma, who at midnight stood with a get-away Porsche revved up outside the GDR team hotel. More than 1000 metres up the street waited a TV team, who had persuaded Pöhland to repeat his flight – this time under the camera’s floodlights.²

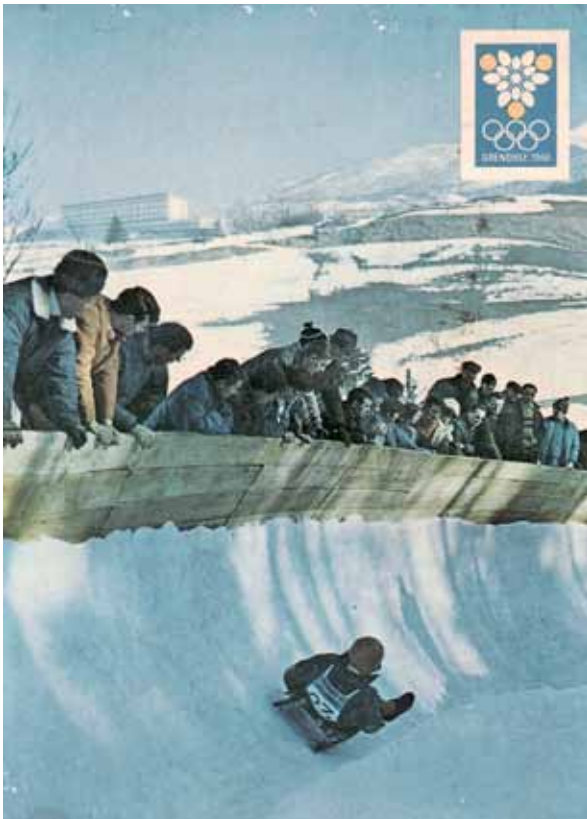
Four days later, Pöhland received his West German Olympic uniform. But his sudden change of sides was not rewarded. The International Ski Federation (FIS) banned him until 1st June 1968 because of his switch of allegiance. And it is no exaggeration to say that after that the atmosphere had become poisoned.

In winter sports at the time the East Germans were not yet a superpower. Besides figure-skating European champion, Gabriele Seyfert, their medal hopes rested above all on the luge, which thanks to the Austrian schoolteacher Bert Isatsitsch³ had been added in 1959 to the Olympic programme.

After initial hesitation, the GDR lugers, in the 1960s began to dominate from the start. At the 1964 Winter Games in Innsbruck – at that time still a part of the common German team – they took gold and silver in



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Souvenir postcard from Villard-de-Lans, where the 1968 the luge competitions took place. The natural track was 1000 m long but the fencing consisted partly of boards.

Illustration: Rüdiger Fritz Collection

both individual disciplines, and since 1962 at the World Championships they won no fewer than eight titles.

Outstanding was Ortrun Enderlein, 1964 Olympic champion and world champion of 1965 and 1967. In January 1968, the 24-year-old underlined her position as favourite at the Alpine Cup in Imst, when she achieved the fastest time in all three races.

The reasons for their superiority lay in the systematic search for talent and in the training concept. The complete looking after of athletes made possible a systematic professional training regime, against which at most the Austrians and West Germans could be measured. Against that the luge remained a stepchild in most other countries.

Weather capers in Villard-de-Lans

The Olympic competitions of 1968, held in Villard-de-Lans, were not under a good star, as the weather constantly changed. The morning temperatures of minus 18 degrees Celsius were recorded and at noon 12 degrees plus. A great challenge for the organisers as well as for the athletes, who tried in their practice sessions to find the best equipment for the extreme changing conditions.

And so much flexibility was demanded of the participants, for the timetables under these conditions could never be kept. The 1st men's race, intended for the 8th February, was postponed for 24 hours because of thaw. Yet even on that day the track was just a little usable as on the next.

After a long wait the track could be used on the morning of the 11th February, 7.00. The result: in 1st place the Austrian Manfred Schmid, followed by Hans Plenk (FRG) and Horst Hörnlein (GDR). In fifth: the Olympic champion of 1964 and reigning world champion Thomas Köhler from the GDR. Starting third from last, he had slid into a "hole" in the big S-curve.

Directly after the men came the women, where as expected the GDR girls occupied the top finishes. The only surprise was the Italian Erika Lechner, who pushed herself with a gap of only two hundredths of a second between the leading Ortrun Enderlein and her teammate Anna-Maria Müller.

To use the opportunity, the jury decided to hold the second races on the same morning. For the men, Köhler had the best time. He had been able to shorten his gap behind to Schmid to 0.26 seconds. In third place, two GDR men, Hörnlein and Klaus-Michael Bonsack, were 0.64 behind the Austrian who was still leading.

With the women, the first three were only separated by hundredths of seconds. Müller, who had won the second race, lay 0.06 sec behind Enderlein, followed by Lechner (-0.07) and the third GDR luger Angela Knösel (-0.69) as well as the West Germans Christa Schmuck (-0.91) and Angelika Dünhaupt (-1.14).

The competitions were to be continued the next day. But as it had started to rain, the 3rd race had to be postponed. Because a fall in temperature was expected for the night, the organisers requested that track specialists be stationed on the bob track of Alpe-d'Huez. They sprayed in the evening the site of Villard-de-Lans with 400 litres of "Air Liquid" so that the track was iced over at minus 160 to 180 degrees. As it turned out, the ensuing frost achieved something else.

The "snow test" of the president of the jury

On the morning of the 13th of February the track was usable, but the start of the men's race, scheduled for 7.30, was again delayed, not because of the ice-covered track, but because the IBM timing device was not working. In addition, the West German team leader, Richard Hartmann,⁴ had requested the jury to check the temperature control of the runners.

Back in 1965, the FIL at its congress had accepted a resolution from the International Luge Regulations (IRO) concerning blade temperatures because some riders at the Winter Games in Innsbruck had heated the runners of their sledges to achieve better sliding ability. If a runner temperature reached 60 degrees a time improvement of around half a second could be achieved.

There were various types of "heating" procedures at that time that were not yet forbidden. The Austrian Josef Feistmantl, for example, bored holes in the runners and

A photo taken ten minutes before the start of the third run shows that the GDR lugers have placed the sledges with the runners in the snow. This was on the orders of the jury chairman, to “cool off” the runners.

Photo: Klaus Schlage



filled them with hot oil. The West German lugers used a type of protective runner which could be connected to the mains and which then transmitted the warmth to the steel runner.

Among those who were not prepared to compete against lugers with heated runners were the East Germans, who in training races on the track at Igls achieved worse times than their rivals. After they had discovered the secret, they procured at the last moment blowtorches and were able to heat up their own runners.⁵

While the use of warm methods was soon exaggerated by some racers, it was noted that hot runners destroyed the starting area of the track. It was a rule of fair play to forbid heating procedures. The new rule ran:

§18 f) Warming of runners:

1. *At the start of a competitor the edges of the runners must be of a normal temperature corresponding to the surroundings of the start*
2. *Any sort of warming of the runners by heaters is forbidden.*⁶

In practice it meant that a member of the Technical Commission, who at the same time worked at the starts, checked the temperature of the steel runners by hand.

The FIL had passed on this critical task in Villard-de-Lans to the Austrian Heinz Scheimpflug.⁷ The former luger, however, several times did not check on the bow of the runners, but instead gripped the waxed surfaces, which then led to warnings from the racers.

Before the start of the men's race, the president of the jury, the Pole Lucjan Świdorski⁸ appeared at the start and began to check various lugers by seizing hold of their runners. On Schmid's high-standing sledge Świdorski conducted the "snow test", hitherto unknown even to the athletes. During this test he let fall a fingernail size piece of snow on the ice edge of the runner. As expected at temperatures of zero degrees, the snow did not remain but melted and after a few seconds flowed down the runner.

Although Świdorski had not inspected the machines of the GDR athletes, Köhler became suspicious. When Scheimpflug hesitated to release the luge, he asked cautiously if there were objections, to which the latter replied: "I can't say anything." Finally he allowed the start, whereupon Köhler also won the third race, cutting into Schmid's lead by 16 hundredths.

Accompanied by the Italian team leader, Paul Ambrosi, and Austria's chief coach, Emmerich Walch, Świdorski



To check the temperature of the runners, starter Heinz Scheimpflug simply laid his hand on them. In the photo: GDR luger Angela Knösel.

Photo: Gerhard Kiesling

appeared shortly afterwards at the women's start. He checked the unwaxed luge of a Japanese racer with the "snow test" and turned as if by chance to the sledges of the GDR women, which had arrived at the start about 25 minutes before the official start time.

As before, Świdorski, using his forefinger, dropped a few snow crystals on the runners. These crystals melted at temperatures, now at four degrees, in a few tenths of a second. In the view of the jury president the runners were too warm. He demanded that the GDR athletes place their sledges with the runners in the snow, for "now there is still enough time."⁹ To Enderlein, he said: "So that there is no protest."¹⁰ Świdorski did not check any more sledges. There still remained eight minutes before the start.

As ordered, the trio laid their sledges in the snow. It was then the responsibility of the starter to check the runner temperatures directly before the starting signal by placing his hand on them. As he had no objections, he cleared all the athletes.

The result of the 3rd race confirmed the previous competition result. Müller again had the best time, reducing her gap to Enderlein, who had maintained her leading position by two hundredths of a second. Third was Lechner, who had the same placing in the

general classification. In 4th place Knösel – now with a clear gap to Schmuck in 5th (-0.44) and Dünhaupt in sixth (-0.63). Directly after the race the General Secretary of the East German Sledge and Bobsleigh Federation, Horst Briesemeister, was asked to come to the Finish Building. Irritated, he turned round, when Świdorski indicated: "It's nothing".¹¹

A little later the 4th race for the men and women was cancelled because of the weather. The athletes returned to their accommodation. The GDR team had their quarters in the Hotel "Taiga". A bare half-hour later, Briesemeister was ordered to appear before the jury, which, in the presence of Isatitsch, informed him of the disqualification of the female lugers. Briesemeister reacted violently with loud protests, whereupon the jury broke off its business.

Shortly after that IBM published the corrected result of the three races, which showed Lechner in first place ahead of Schmuck and Dünhaupt. On the sheet were the names of five disqualified competitors: the Italian Cristina Pabst, who had left the track in the second race and had a serious accident, the Canadian Phyllis Walter who had also fallen, as well as – the sequence of their starting numbers – Knösel, Müller and Enderlein.¹²



The media crush after a stormy press conference: in the foreground GDR team leader Manfred Ewald.

Right: "The jury has today resolved ..."

The decision to disqualify the three GDR women lugeists was set out on half a page.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archive

The Winter Games had their scandal, in which the parties had set upon each other. In the midst of it all were three young women who were unaware of any guilt. The fact was that the race controller had cleared the track, which had the same significance as the confirmation that they had kept to the rules.

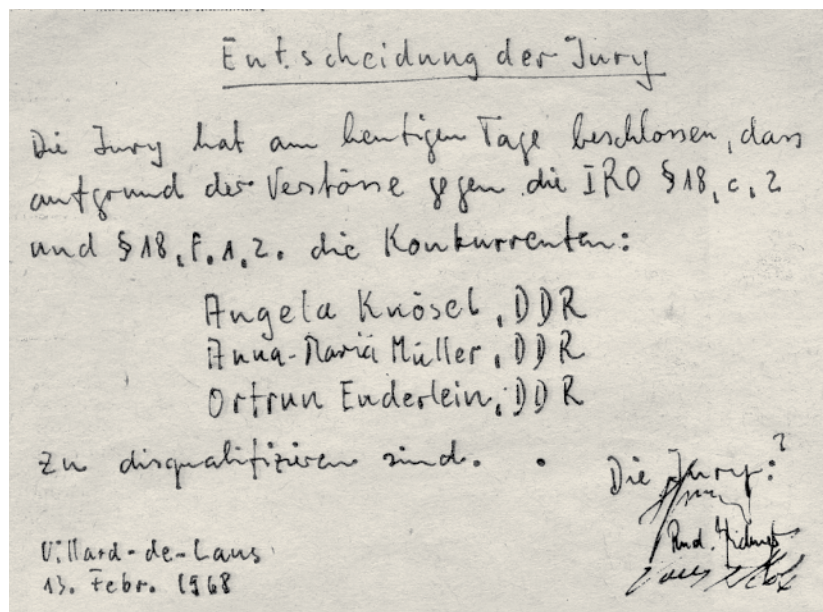
An illegal meeting of the team leaders

After the leader of the East German Olympic team, Manfred Ewald, had learned of the disqualification at around 1 p.m., he telephoned Isatitsch, who agreed with him to call a special meeting of the FIL Executive Committee as soon as the minutes of the disqualification were available. Until then the results could not be written, as there was no typist.

An hour before the team leaders of the participating countries met by chance at a reception in the town hall of Villard-de-Lans, Hartmann used this opportunity to invite his colleagues to a meeting at the hotel of the West German lugers. The GDR official had not been informed.

Hartmann, who had taken the chair, drafted a handwritten resolution to the FIL Executive Board. It culminated in the demand to exclude not only the East German women but also the entire team. However, he left it to the Polish representative Włodzimierz Żróbk¹³ to present the text of the draft.

Concerning the last item there was no unanimity. Some thought that an entire team could not be disqualified without valid proof. Doubters were told that there was an Italian film that showed how the sledges had been heated. But it was discovered that no such film existed. The Norwegian Rolf Ström was among those who refused to sign the resolution. The representatives from Sweden and Czechoslovakia joined him. The leader of the French team, meanwhile, had then left the room.



Events then came thick and fast. At 2.30 p.m. a scientific paper arrived at the Hotel "Taiga" sent by telegram from the Technical University at Dresden detailing the cooling of sledge runners. Dr. Heinz Schöbel, IOC Member as well as the President of the East German NOC¹⁴, had requested the scientific paper

An hour later, at the request of Isatitsch, the three women appeared at the Hotel "Alsace", where the Swiss jury member Rudolf Widmer recorded a report that included the facts and the statements of Świderski, trainers Walch and Ambrosi as well as the affected athletes.

As there was still no typewriter, Widmer wrote in pencil. The minutes were not ready until two hours later – signed only by Widmer himself.¹⁵

At 4.30 p.m. the 15-member GDR luge team swore on oath at the office of notary Barlet in Villard-de-Lans that it had committed "no act or action to warm up the runners of their sports equipment". As demanded by the laws of the host country, the owners of the Hotel "La Taiga" vouched for their guests.¹⁶

At 7 p.m. the GDR representatives Schöbel, Ewald and Hans Friedrich¹⁷ made the FIL board aware of the scientific paper and the declaration in lieu of an oath. They demanded the withdrawal of the disqualification, which was loudly defended by Świderski. Although Isatitsch had promised to examine the case again, the jury decision of the FIL Executive was confirmed late at night by 6:1. The only vote against came from Erhard Feuereis from the GDR, President of the FIL Sports Commission.¹⁸

The disqualification of the GDR men, demanded by the team leaders from Poland, Austria, Italy, Canada, the USA and Argentina (represented as a 'team' only by the official Matías Stinnes¹⁹) was not discussed. Isatitsch even explained that it had not been officially handed in.²⁰

For Brundage a “technical problem”

In the midday hours of the next day, the leadership of the GDR team went into attack mode. At an international press conference, Ewald read out a declaration, which he then passed on to the IOC. It called for the overturn of the FIL decision. In the declaration, Świderski's claim that the GDR athletes appeared at the start with unpermitted warmed-up runners, was referred to as untrue.

According to Ewald, the charges had all started “in circles of the West German leadership”, the proof of which was the fact that the unofficial meeting of the team leaders had taken place in the house of the West Germans.²¹

It was obvious that the leadership of the West German Olympic team would reject the accusations. In a letter to IOC President Avery Brundage these were described as “an insult” and “an attack against Olympic peace”.²² In retrospect, Walther Tröger, who as NOC General Secretary had been a co-signatory, had to admit that he “did not quite understand the issue” and had to rely on the information of his luge team, i.e. Hartmann.²³

Isatitsch angrily dismissed Ewald's announcement that he would take the matter to the IOC: “We will sort this out ourselves. We don't need the IOC for that.”²⁴ In addition, he made sure that the GDR request to place the disqualification on the agenda of the FIL Congress was refused by 11 to 4 votes. That did not, however, prevent him from issuing a “Declaration of the Executive Committee” as a press communiqué, in which the charges were repeated almost word for word and the jury decision confirmed.²⁵

Yet if one compares the jury minutes with the communiqué, one quickly comes across contradictions. In the declaration, for example, it says that two of the three GDR athletes (Müller and Knösel) had admitted, “Their runners showed significantly increased temperatures”. But in the minutes they disputed that they had heated the runners. It was only confirmed “the snow fizzed and melted” (Müller) or on the unwaxed runner of the Japanese test racer “stuck somewhat longer than on my waxed sledge” (Knösel).²⁶

Also, the time at which Świderski had undertaken the “snow test” had suddenly changed. While in the minutes there was talk of “around 10–8 minutes before the departure of the first lady”, the declaration assumed “a period of 3–7 minutes before the start”. That permitted the FIL Executive to justify the disqualification not only with § 18 f) 1 (warming of the runners) but to extend it to breaching the “readiness to start” (§ 20).

It stated in the rules: the competitors must be present at the start 10 minutes before the starting time.²⁷ As the GDR luger had been drawn of the 26 participants in the midfield or as the last (Knösel No. 13, Müller 14, Enderlein 26), therefore about 30 or 60 minutes passed before they could take up their races.²⁸



Consciously ignored was Świderski's order to place the sledges with the runners in the snow. Also, his statement, whereby the check took place “in objective fashion” and “before witnesses” was duplicitous.²⁹ With the exception of the Japanese woman, who did not take part in the competition, the “snow test” was only undertaken with the GDR lugers, so that Świderski had no comparisons.

The two witnesses were anything but objective. Walch and Ambrosi were trainers of competing teams who had an understandable interest in placing their athletes well to the fore. Why Świderski had not engaged independent people, remained puzzling. How randomly everything took place, Ambrosi himself stated: “This check interested me, and I went together with him [Świderski].”³⁰

The lugers' results to be sure were measured by IBM in hundredths of seconds, but the temperature of the runners was measured by placing hands on them. Let alone the reliability of the “snow test”, which was little put in question by the FIL as by Świderski's subjective perception: “All three athletes were red and shocked at this finding [of warm runners]”.³¹ That the sportswomen were upset at the false accusations, he probably could not properly imagine.

To make his own picture of the events in Villard-de-Lans, Brundage had himself flown in by helicopter on 15th February. He read the FIL documents, came on the contradictions, but without publicly saying anything. Whereupon it was announced that the IOC President had agreed to the decision.³² Brundage saw himself then obliged to produce this declaration the next day:

After receiving the letter from Herr Dr. Schöbel I went on a special journey to Villard-de-Lans, to hear the board of the FIL. During this I established that there are differences of opinion in the interpretation of

“All three athletes were red and shocked”, said jury chairman Lućjan Świderski. He took this as an admission of their guilt. From left: Angela Knösel, Ortrun Enderlein and Anna-Maria Müller.

Bert Isatitsch from Austria was President of the International Luge Federation (FIL) from 1957 until his death. The Pole Lucjan Świdorski (far right) became Vice-President for Europe in 1958.



Photos: 100 Jahre Rodelsport, 1883-1983

the rules of the IRO and also differences in relation to statements by athletes and officials of the German Sledge and Bobsleigh Federation as well as of the jury and board of the FIL. The view of the IOC is: according to Paragraph 40³³ (p. 28) of the IOC statute the federations are responsible in all technical questions for the carrying out of the competitions. The integrity of the jury is binding on the IOC. As the above mentioned paragraph is binding for the IOC, the IOC sees itself unable to change a decision of the FIL.

Hardly had Brundage departed than the FIL decided to cancel the still outstanding fourth races because of the meteorological conditions. The placing after three rounds then formed the basis for the final result. For the women lugers, the Italian Erika Lechner was declared Olympic champion while the West Germans, Christa Schmuck and Angelika Dünhaupt were the silver and bronze medallists.

There were no limits to imagination

The next forenoon, Brundage received the GDR sportswomen in Grenoble's "Alphotel". He was surprised when they came before him, not in despair, but smiling. Brundage assured them that he would esteem them as good competitors. But as he regarded the disqualification as a "technical problem", he asked for understanding that he could not get mixed up in the competencies of the FIL.

In conversation it had come out that Świdorski had denied that he had asked the women to place their sledges to cool in the snow. The IOC President also showed a pile of 200 telegrams received from the GDR and in which the cancellation of the sanctions was demanded. The next day another 100 arrived.

The Cold War between the two German states, which at the end of 1966 had calmed down a little, heated up again.³⁴ The propaganda machines went into overdrive, and on both sides of the Berlin Wall hotheads went to work. Throw away sentences turned into top announcements. Facing journalists questions, coach Walch was asked whether he himself had seen the East

Germans heating their runners: "Yes, I was a witness. I threw some snow on the runners, which straightaway hissed into steam."³⁵ The "little piece of snow" that, according to Świdorski's statement, had dropped on to the runners grew in the media to a "handful of snow" and that he had "tipped" it on to the runners.³⁶

So there was no limit to imagination. It was given wings in the search to find by which method the GDR lugers could have heated their sledges. Was it with the help of a strong power supply, which they had specially laid in the hotel? Athletes with technical jobs and the ability to be able to prepare their sledges themselves were automatic suspects. Enderlein was named as a precision engineer or the locksmith Bonsack, who was named as the "heater of Grenoble".³⁷

Among those who climbed particularly far out on the limb was Willi Daume, who was still annoyed at the defeat suffered in Madrid in 1965. Although the President of the NOC for Germany had left Grenoble immediately after the end of the IOC Session, he then put himself in a position with the news media to make remarkable "analyses". In a radio commentary he described Ewald and comrades as "miserable liars" and "deceivers", whom he held responsible for the "biggest scandal" to have "burdened the Olympic Games and the Olympic Idea".³⁸ A similar outbreak of words by the "sports diplomat" was not received well in his own ranks. In a newspaper could be read: "A gentleman ... does not fight in the street."³⁹

However, the East Germans had in the past not handled Daume exactly with velvet gloves. Also this time it was noticeable that the attacks concentrated on the West German sports leadership, which he headed up. Although the West German team benefited from the disqualifications with two medals, but the Austrians and Italians also did not go empty-handed.

Even the Polish part was kept small, although, according to secret service reports, Świdorski was in involved in a dependent economic relationship with Hartmann. Also, his tense relationship with the GDR Federation was known. He resented the fact that the GDR luger trained in Krynica, Poland, in order to snatch away the medals from his own compatriots.⁴⁰

The decision about this restraint had been taken to the highest level. When the officials of the GDR team asked Erich Honecker, if "a public position should be taken against the Polish representatives on the jury?", the "second man" in the East German leadership at the time wrote in an internal memo, a big "No".⁴¹

It was obvious that in 1967 the Polish bishops with their "Non possumus"⁴² had refused obedience to a worldly power and when it had come to demonstration in Warsaw in January 1968 because of the closure of a play critical of the regime, the GDR leadership stopped everything to pour oil on the flames. Also, June 1967

the Six Day War in the Mideast contributed, as Poland subsequently broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, producing great emotion and not just among the Jewish population. As the official GDR had expressed solidarity with the Arabic states, a shadow was bound to fall on the relationship of the "brother peoples".

In order not to cause further external damage and not to put the IOC under pressure because it was hoped to secure recognition of the NOC at the next Session, the "luge scandal" was soon put to one side. That was all the easier, because on the last day of the Winter Olympics the doubles team of Bonsack/Köhler won the gold medal. The victory was appropriately celebrated.

But internally was further investigated. The Ministry for State Security took up investigations, and its extensive research, which has been available since the 1990s, fully confirms the innocence of the athletes. Because criticism of GDR's own officials was not spared – they were accused of a lack of "watchfulness" – one can assume the correctness of the reports. The "Stasi" had no interest in false information.⁴³

From a report of the German Academy of Sciences one also finds that since the luges had been stored overnight in the hotel, the runners during the march to the starting place showed a temperature of around 12 to 15 degrees. During the walk of 15 minutes to the start – the sledges were carried on the athletes' backs – the temperature dropped according to the statements of the physicists so that at the moment of the "snow test" it was higher than 6 to 7 degrees (and lower than 11 to 12 degrees).⁴⁴ According to the report, through exposure to the sun at an altitude of 1000 m, however, each steel runner reacts differently. Thus an objective verdict would only have been possible if the sledges of all participants had been checked, especially as the FIL had not more closely defined the concept of "surrounding temperature".

Under these circumstances, according to scientists it is "physically completely understandable" for few snow crystals to melt on waxed runners. Thus they came to the conclusion that the sledges were not artificially warmed. As in addition the runners had lain for ten minutes in the snow to cool, they showed "with certainty" a temperature "in the vicinity of zero degrees".⁴⁵

On this basis the GDR Sledge and Bobsleigh Federation requested the rehabilitation of the three women while the FIL board showed no interest in opening up this can of worms again. That could be no surprise, for with the elections of 1969 Hartmann had moved up to the Executive Committee. In 1971, Jan Steler⁴⁶, a Polish architect living in France and also a friend of Świdorski, became FIL General Secretary. According to press spokesman Harro Esmarch, the Grenoble documents were no longer available after Steler's term in office and the death of FIL President Isatitsch.⁴⁷



Although the wound hurt for a long time, the East German luger and their officials behaved constructively. Even at the FIL Congress in Villard-de-Lans, they made the request to introduce an incorruptible "runner thermometer", with which half an hour before the start of the race the temperature could be measured. The proposal was accepted and introduced at the 1969 World Championships in Königssee in Bavaria. The two luge medals, brought back from Grenoble by West Germany were a welcome argument to erect the first artificially iced sledge track.

At the first World Championships, however, the GDR girls shone with six places in the top seven. Only Christa Schmuck, in third, could keep up on her home track. Also at the 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo, the GDR team left nothing on the track. It won all eight possible medals; only the gold in the doubles had to be shared with Italy. The female Olympic champion was Anna-Maria Müller, who as a pious Catholic had particularly suffered under the punishment. Now no one insinuated that she had "heated".

Victory ceremony in the women's competition: the Italian Erika Lechner took gold. The medals won by Christa Schmuck (left) and Angelika Dünhaupt inspired the West Germans to build the first artificial bob and luge track in Königssee.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive



A reunion in front of the "Hotel Erika" in Meransen: Erika Lechner and Ortrun Zöpfel-Enderlein.

Photo: Bernd Zöpfel

A friendship which endures 50 years on: Ortrun Zöphel-Enderlein (left) and Erika Lechner.

Photo: Bernd Zöphel



A truce was even made with Świdorski. But he remained under observation. After the 1976 Winter Games in Innsbruck the Ministry for State Security was informed:

Under the influence of alcohol, Świdorski declared that in 1968 ... he had acted on behalf of Lembert when he maintained that the GDR luge team was illegally heating their runners.⁴⁸

Behind the falsely noted name "Lembert" was hidden Tomasz Lempart⁴⁹, since 1956 General Secretary of the Polish NOC. In April 1968, when the pressure to emigrate among Polish Jews increased and up to 25,000 left the

country, he was dismissed. He was permitted to move to Israel, where he worked for six months at the Wingate Institute, until he was taken on by the (West) German Sport Confederation (DSB). After he had introduced his experiences in top-level sport gained in the Eastern block, he was installed as Director in the newly created Federal Committee Competitive Sport (BAL).

"These girls are innocent"

In the year of German reunification – 1990 – Ortrun Zöphel-Enderlein, who had long been pained by the loss of her second gold medal, undertook a holiday trip to the South Tirol. An excursion led her to Maranza (Meransen), where Erika Lechner had built a hotel. Zöphel could not refrain from looking at the stately lodging, and it did not take long until the landlady, who in her active sports career had been employed as a housemaid to the President of the Italian Sledge Federation, had realized who her visitor was.

After initial hostility, it turned into a heartfelt meeting, for Zöphel had nothing with which to reproach her former rival. On the contrary, the Italian had immediately after the events of Villard-de-Lans sent her a sympathetic letter.

If there is needed any further proof that the GDR sledgers were wrongly punished 50 years ago, then it should be legitimate to break the postal secrecy here for the first time. ■

Dear Ortrun!

When I had read that newspaper⁵⁰ you sent me, tears came into my eyes. I am really sorry, dear Ortrun, that all that happened. I never believed that your runners were heated

For I know you to be honest girls. For that reason I wanted to come to you on the day of the disqualification and talk to you. But I was not allowed, for other orders came over which I had no control. From this time on I had "constant accompaniment", but not in the sense you meant. No, there I could tell you something completely different.

Believe me, Ortrun, I would have the greater joy with my bronze medal, which I now have, for this medal will in my heart never belong to me. I said that also to Thomas Köhler! Yes, if I could have done as I wanted, then it would look different today and I would not feel as I do. You were really only deceived and the medals you deserved taken from you, which we now have and are unhappy with.

I have also spoken to Christa Schmuck about it, who just like me does not feel good.

Even before I went to get this medal, I shed some tears and said to myself over and over: "these girls are innocent". But when one of my accompanying officials heard this, he scolded me until I was calm again.

Dear Ortrun, forgive what was done to you. Perhaps the truth will still on day come to light; I will at once be ready to help you ...

Dear Ortrun, do me a favour and please write to me again. If you should ever need my help, I will willingly stand at your side.

Heartfelt greetings

Erika Lechner

Please say hello to Anna-Maria Müller and Angela Knösel.⁵¹